

Kosmas 'honored, humbled' by Congress challenge

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By JOHN BOZZO

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Winning the campaign to represent Florida's 24th congressional district marked only the beginning.

Suzanne Kosmas -- the first Volusia County resident to be elected to Congress in nearly two decades -- went to Washington amid the pomp of the inauguration of the first black president in the nation's history and the controversy over how to combat the worst economy since the Great Depression.

We caught up by telephone this week with the former state legislator, longtime civic leader and owner of a New Smyrna Beach real estate business, shortly after her vote in support of the economic stimulus package that passed Congress.

Q. What were your thoughts while you watched the inauguration of Barack Obama?

A. I was seated behind him on the dais, above and behind the president. The view for me was to look out literally over the sea of human faces who had come out to celebrate this moment in history. It was, as far and as wide as the eye could see, body to body celebrating a very significant moment in history

For me personally to be able to join those faces and be part of that historic moment as an elected congresswoman was very moving. I continue to say that I'm both honored and humbled to be part of this great time in America's history.

Q. You had hoped to hit the ground running. Are you satisfied with what you were able to do? What kind of opportunity for a learning curve is there with a president who's determined to move quickly?

A. I think it's fair to say we have been on the learning curve for quite a few months in terms of what is going to be required of the new leadership, that being the president and his administration and the new Congress, in terms of facing up to the extraordinary challenge that is before this country at this time.

So many of us, and probably most Americans, have given thought to how serious the challenge is. Many have been significantly affected in their personal life by job loss, or loss of health care or loss of a home that are the outcome of the recession that we're in. I think it's fair to say that much thought has been given to what kinds of action can be taken to mitigate the losses, hopefully alleviate the current crisis, and also prepare for the future in a way that includes some regulatory changes that might prevent this from happening again.

Q. You voted against the TARP (Troubled Asset Relief Program) legislation. What won your support for the economic stimulus package?

A. It's not a perfect bill, but the seriousness of the challenge we face -- Florida has suffered the second-worst job loss in the nation with 255,000 jobs lost, we are one of the leading states in home foreclosures and frankly the state budget is facing an ongoing crisis as well -- the opportunity to stem the tide, if you will, by spending money that will immediately create jobs, will help our local governments to move forward with infrastructure projects they were unable to fund, but will also create immediate job increases and provide our schools with critical funding that has been lost to state cuts, was too good to resist.

It also includes significant tax breaks for small businesses and individuals.

The difference for me is the TARP did not have sufficient oversight or regulatory reform. We, the American people, are entitled to know exactly where those dollars are and the intended impact they are supposed to have. This bill (the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, or stimulus plan) has tremendous accountability built into it, including oversight, public transparency and no earmarks. This is the best assurance we can provide to the American people that this money and these tax cuts are designed to be invested in a prudent way.

Q. What has been the biggest surprise so far, or something you've had to adjust to? Is the pace what you expected?

A. I continue to be excited about this opportunity to be part of our American democracy. I think the attempts by both the administration and (congressional) majority at being bipartisan in the way they've dealt with these issues are very encouraging to me.

The optimism of people in these challenging times is inspirational.

In terms of the pace, I'm used to working hard in a lot of different arenas, all at the same time. From that perspective it isn't that much of a challenge. Naturally, you miss your hometown on the days that you're not there.

I'm a person who likes to walk for recreation. I'm a very hardy walker. There is a lot of walking on Capitol Hill. It's a great way to decompress and also engage with constituents and colleagues. I love to walk, so for me this is a good thing.